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The counseling center at Cherry Creek High School was moved from a remote part of the high school to one of the busiest areas, across from the library and student lounge. The physical facilities consist of a large, open and carpeted area with desks, comfortable chairs, tables, and bookshelves filled with material related to counseling. Conference rooms for privacy, group work, or teacher-counselor group meetings were provided. Each counselor was, and is, scheduled out of the office for one-half day a week on a regular basis. The counselors are thus free to work with students elsewhere. Noticeable differences were observed in the frequency of student visits to the center and in the open and spontaneous nature of student-counselor interaction. Students seemed to feel much more free to congregate in the center to talk, look through materials, and to engage counselors in casual conversation. Teachers also frequented the center. The use of radically different physical facilities and the development of new attitudes toward counselor involvement in the total student life helped to dissolve the idea of the "problem centered counselor." (PS)

COUNSELING WITHOUT OFFICES:

GUIDANCE IN A NEW CONTEXT

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COUNSELING WITHOUT OFFICES: GUIDANCE IN A NEW CONTEXT

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There would probably be little disagreement that guidance services should be for all children. A valid case can be made for the suggestion that all children in the course of normal development can use help in developing ways of effectively dealing with learning problems, interpersonal relations and in making wise decisions.

Counselors seem to be in agreement with this premise. How, then, may guidance services be effectively extended to all students? Even with desirable student-counselor ratios (Conant suggests 300-1), it is virtually impossible to make much of an impact on the total student body on an individual basis.

There seems to be a large gap in research on the effectiveness of counseling. Even in the extensive longitudinal studies of Rothney, no really significant gains could be seen in those who were "given guidance services" and those who weren't. Brief individual contacts with students do not, in most cases, alter their behavior or life.

Add to this the reports of secondary school surveys of student perceptions of counseling and guidance services. These consistently reveal that students do not generally take personal problems to counselors; that counselors do not seem to know students well enough; that counselors are "too busy" to talk with students; that frequently the counselor doesn't know what is happening in the classroom; that it is difficult to get to see a counselor; and in general, counselors seem to be out of touch with the every day concerns of students.

All of this appears to point toward some serious inadequacies in secondary school guidance programs. Either the philosophy is wrong and it is impossible to extend guidance services to all students, or perhaps the counselor unwittingly places barriers between himself and meaningful student interaction.

A traditionally trained counselor, whose work consists mostly of rendering "guidance services," sees himself as a specialist in individual counseling. The student perceives him as a problem-oriented specialist. Consequently, two conflicting and contradictory forces are set in motion, the implications of which seem to elude the counselor.

Perhaps this distinction can be made clearer. Counselors must surely deceive themselves if they consider that they are able to render guidance services to all young people through a philosophical commitment to individual counseling as methodology. If the student correctly identifies the counselor as problem or crisis-oriented, where does this leave the individual who seems to be relatively free of problems or interference to his growth and education? It is the contention of the Cherry Creek High School Counselors that if, indeed, barriers do exist they are a manifestation of this conflict. The first barrier may very well be a physical one.

Guidance facilities in most schools have been created and developed in a generally haphazard manner. Many times an unused and unaccessible portion of the building is converted to office space. This has set a pattern for many newly built offices. All too frequently the guidance offices are located in close proximity to the administrative offices. The negative implications of the latter should be all too obvious for additional comment.

Picture now, if you will, the fairly typical guidance center which has evolved in most secondary schools. The counselors are located near the administrative offices which, in many instances, are poorly located in terms of being in the center of student activity. Each counselor has a small office or counseling cubicle in which to do his work and see students. More and more counselors are receiving the services of secretaries who, among other duties, schedule appointments for students to see their counselors.

Counselors have long sought facilities with private offices and secretarial assistance to handle appointments, telephone calls and the many clerical tasks required in a busy guidance office. School counselors, seeking to develop a more professional atmosphere in terms of physical facilities, have perhaps lost the advantage. That is to say, the trend has been directed toward the development of a "clinic" atmosphere. This is characterized by small offices lined up in a row, a narrow corridor providing access, a receptionist to "run interference" for the counselor and, by no means least, a <u>procedure</u> which students must follow if they are to see a counselor.

It goes without saying that this arrangement has decided advantages. The requirement of privacy and confidentiality in counseling is hardly debatable. The importance of assigning a secretary to the counseling staff has been ably demonstrated.

Something is wrong, however. Counselors seem to have insulated themselves from the world. The world in this case is the world of student life in the school. Again, the counselor is confronted with the contradiction suggested earlier in this report. In the face of student perceptions of counselor functions and the increasing awareness of inadequacies in guidance services, the counselor appears to have become unable to confront the problem with insights necessary to effect a solution.

The counselor, groping for a solution to the dilemma, has become more process-oriented. He seems more concerned with how something is done, rather than what is done. The Cherry Creek Counselors propose that it is just this kind of insular thinking that has led many a counselor to a constricted and unimaginative view of his image and function. Counselors may well be unaware of the many barriers, both physical and psychological, that prevent or inhibit a spontaneous and free interaction with students.

A little over a year ago counselors in the Cherry Creek High School, of suburban Denver, Colorado, began discussing the possibility of moving the counseling offices to a more central location in the school. They expressed a growing concern over their remote location and an unremitting student opinion all too much like that which was discussed earlier.

Interestingly enough, it was the Cherry Creek Counselors' sensitivity to student feeling which may have prevented a perpetration of the same kinds of facilities and attitudes now regarded as contributing to the establishment of barriers.

The student, in most respects, correctly sees the counselor as being problem-oriented. Students at Cherry Creek were asked what it would take to establish more meaningful contacts with their counselors. They agreed that moving the counseling center to a more central location in the building would do much toward making it convenient for students to see their counselors. But they also suggested something else which, because of its subtlety, concealed some rather far reaching and exciting implications.

As the counselors debated on the size of each office, where hallways should go and where doors should open, the size of the waiting room and many other problems of physical layout (all of which now in retrospect seem vaguely inconsequential), several students observed that if they had to go through secretaries, down hallways and into little offices everytime they wanted to see their counselor--they just wouldn't bother!

It was as simple as that. Here was probably one of the major barriers whose shape had never really been defined. Was it this efficient arrangement of offices, waiting rooms and secretaries which made it virtually impossible for a student to spontaneously "drop in" to talk with his counselor, perhaps about a good weekend, the book just read, a new date, or plans for the summer. How spontaneously can one interact when he has to make an appointment everytime he wants to spend a few moments "just talking" with his counselor?

Tradition is never easy to break. But perhaps this is what is at root of many of education problems, an inability to break from the familiar pattern. The counselors decided, after much thought and discussion, to depart from the model. And with the departure came the venture into a new concept and pattern of counselor role and function.

The Cherry Creek Counselors would like to characterize this by using the term "reaching out." For it is indeed just that, a reaching out to the student and teacher, an opening up of one's self and extension of one's services to student and faculty--going to them!

What evolved then was a plan for a Counseling Center with exciting innovative features in design. Can you imagine a counselor without an office? At one time this was common, and greatly deplored by counselors. The Cherry Creek design may well suggest a return to this arrangement, but with strikingly different modification.

The new Counseling Center is located opposite the library and student lounge--literally in the center of student activity and movement. Two classrooms were remodeled to accommodate the space requirement of the Center. Upon entering the Counseling Center, one is greeted by a large, open and very spacious central area which is entirely carpeted and tastefully furnished with comfortable couches and chairs. There are large round tables for study and extensive bookshelves of reading materials for browsing, whether for educational or vocational information. This area occupies the greater part of the space used in the Center, and is not just a reception and waiting room. The counselors' desks and work spaces are also located in this open room! It is only through the groupings of furniture that one achieves a sense of separation between areas.

Thus, upon entering the Counseling Center, a student may quickly ascertain whether or not his counselor is able to see him without going through

the sometimes discouraging process of seeing a secretary. The secretary is there, of course, to help him if necessary; but the idea is to make the student feel free enough to go directly to his counselor without unnecessary delays. Frequently the counselor, when he sees who comes in, may be able to quickly take care of several students by answering brief questions then, or making a determination as to when and for how long he can see a student.

What about privacy and confidentiality, which counselors agree is so important? The counselors at Cherry Creek gave consideration to this point on two levels. Carpeting, drapes along one entire wall and upholstered furniture have enormously reduced the noise level in the Counseling Center. It is possible, for example, to talk with someone, either at a counselor's desk or at any one of the groupings of furniture, without really being overheard or disturbing to others. The addition of FM music in the Center not only enhances the feeling that it is an inviting and comfortable place to come for study, talk, etc., but also serves to suppress audible voice sounds.

Easily one-half of all counselor-student "conferences" are really of a nature which do not require privacy and confidentiality. They are, more times than not, questions requiring simple answers, some direction or clarification on such things as schedules and so on.

When privacy is desired, there are three small conference rooms available and easily accessible from any counselor's desk. These rooms offer complete privacy and are large enough for three to four people. A larger group conference room is located at one end of the Center. This is divided by an acoustical folding wall. Large group meetings of teachers or students may be held in this room, or it may be divided and used for smaller group counseling sessions. Even these counseling and conference rooms reflect the overall goal of making the Center an inviting place to come. There are soft comfortable chairs, carpeting and a feeling of privacy. Each room is painted a different pastel color.

All furniture, desks, doors and wood trim are done in warm walnut stain. Upholstery is in bright and varied colors. Everything is designed to look as much unlike school as possible.

It has been implied in the foregoing that change in the facilities of a school is not sufficient to bring about improvement in learning or guidance services. There must be a concomitant change in attitude and disposition toward a redefinition of counselor role and function. So frequently innovations in education fail because educators continue doing the same thing--only in a different context.

To reinforce the counselors' new approach to working with students, an additional feature was proposed. This was to be another manifestation of the "reaching out." In practice it is a very simple procedure of scheduling the counselors' time.

Each counselor is "scheduled out" of the office one-half day a week on a regular basis. A counselor who is out mornings may shift to afternoons either at the quarter or semester. No more than one counselor is out of the Center at any one time. On the morning or afternoon that the counselor is out of the office, he is not required to "report in"; no appointments are scheduled for him; nor is any attempt made to reach him for telephone calls. There is, however, always a member of the counseling staff who is "on call." He covers any emergencies or important telephone calls in the absence of the counselor who is unavailable. Although this may appear to be somewhat elaborate, it is really a simple plan; and it does give the counselor a greater freedom in which to operate.

Now, how does this plan work practically? Being completely free of appointments and other demands on his time while in the Counseling Center, the counselor is able to spend time interacting with groups of students elsewhere. It is expected that the counselor will then be seen as one who is interested in the student as a <u>person</u>, rather than as a problem to be "treated."

When the counselor is freed from the Counseling Center on a half-day a week basis, he is free to explore an immensely large number of possible activities and experiences. These may involve community employment, educational and referral resources, classroom teaching and general student activity involvement.

We have seen, then, that more effective counselor-student interaction may be facilitated through innovation in counseling facilities, counselor attitude and a freer time structure.

When the Counseling Center at Cherry Creek High School was moved from a remote part of the high school building to one of the busiest areas --across from the library and student lounge, noticeable differences were observed in the frequency of student visits to the Center and in the open and spontaneous nature of student-counselor interaction. Students seem to feel much freer to congregate in the Center to talk, look through materials and to engage counselors in casual conversation. Teachers are also seen to frequent the Center to a far greater degree than ever before.

In summary, then, the Cherry Creek High School Counselors suggest that more meaningful counselor-student interaction will take place when the student and teacher see the counselor as something more than an administrator of emotional first aid. This is encouraged through use of radically different physical facilities and new attitudes toward counselor involvement in the <u>total</u> student life.